

*When Harry Met Sally... Dry Cured and Ready to Serve*

by J.R. Wudel

Katz's Delicatessen, on Houston Street in Manhattan's Lower East Side, continues to serve a ruby-red, dry-cured corned beef since they began in 1888. Their dry-cured pickling formula flavors the meat in a process that takes up to one month to complete—compared to commercially prepared corned beef that is pressure injected with water and other chemical additives to achieve the curing process in as little as a day and a half. However great the pleasure of eating Katz's corned beef, this pleasure, as the other diners in the busy dining room of Katz's Deli might believe, does not cause Sally (Meg Ryan) to erupt into orgasm during one infamous scene in the film *When Harry Met Sally...* Rather, this faux orgasm expresses commentary on the relationship between men and women—typical of the conversations shared between Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally in this poignant romantic comedy. Over thirty years ago, *When Harry Met Sally...* unleashed its humor on audiences, and—like Katz's corned beef—it gets better with age.

Writer Nora Ephron and Director Rob Reiner begin the curing process for Harry and Sally's relationship in 1977. Harry and Sally meet as two strangers, brought together by a mutual friend, embarking together for a drive to New York City following their graduation from the University of Chicago. Harry's self-serving pessimism immediately clashes with Sally's forged optimism. During the drive the two argue about everything from the nature of great sex and relationships to the climax of *Casablanca*. Harry discusses his belief that men and women can never be "just friends" because of the sexual tension between them. This meeting comes to a close, and the two part ways seemingly to never see each other again. Thus begins a series of

random meetings, at five-year intervals, that challenge Harry's theory. The two eventually become the closest of friends. However, when a night of emotional support turns to sexual passion, the question posed by the film's tagline—"Can two friends sleep together and still love each other in the morning?"—becomes the dominant theme. The conclusion of the film aims to resolve this question.

*When Harry Met Sally...* encompasses more than just the fluff of your standard romantic comedy and remains as edifying today, as a study of relationships, as it instructed audiences over thirty years ago. Your standard romantic comedy consists of the formula: boy meets girl through a comedic situation, boy loses girl in a tragic action, boy wins girl back in a heartfelt climax. *When Harry Met Sally...* might not veer far from this formula, but along the way screenwriter Nora Ephron's insight into relationships provides the flavorful ingredients that cure the meat of this story. The performances given by Crystal and Ryan, under the direction of Rob Reiner, make up the grilled rye that completes this multi-layered and enriching movie. The film delves deeper into the mere existence of love and relationships than most rom-coms to define the motivations, and how men and women enact these motivations, behind love and relationships. As a result, it may give—like a sandwich from Katz's Deli—some consumers indigestion. However, that does not detract from the film's overall sustenance, enjoyment and impact.

Nora Ephron crafted a script that, at its heart, tells the story of how men and women form and mature relationships while employing a dash of personal revelation that makes it timeless. The film begins with a charming short vignette that depicts one elderly couple revealing to the camera the story of how they met and fell in love. This type of vignette repeats itself throughout the film. They divide the scenes between Harry and Sally and always depict a different couple

and the myriad challenges to forming a lasting relationship. The scenes between Harry and Sally, as they explore their failed relationships with other loves and their own developing relationship, qualify as textbook examples of our own selves. Ephron does not deserve total credit for the intricate details of the storyline. One of the particular reoccurring situations throughout the film shows Sally's trait of special ordering menu items—such as always requesting the sauce on the side. Rob Reiner included this in the film after he noticed Ephron displaying the same characteristic. When he asked her why she was being so choosy her response was “I just like it the way I like it.” This response becomes a line from Sally in the film. As the film progresses, Harry's reactions to Sally's special ordering changes from bewildered disgust, to friendly jabs about being high maintenance, to the unique characteristic that forms the basis of why he loves her. Although the film exhibits signs of its age, such as the use of a rolodex to store personal information in place of today's smart phone, on an emotional level, and as a study of relationships, *When Harry Met Sally...* stands the test of time.

Beyond the subtle changes to Ephron's script, Rob Reiner deserves credit for his skillful direction of Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan to elicit their expressive performances. *When Harry Met Sally...* marks a distinct maturation of the type of films Reiner made in his past. The film, as a dish, combines the sweet taste of the outrageous comedy found in his earlier films, like *This is Spinal Tap* and *The Princess Bride*, with the nutrition of sophisticated drama, like *Stand By Me*. Crystal's particular style of comedy suits itself well to Harry's wisecracking—the summation of his cynical observations of life. In the beginning of the film Harry professes that by looking forward to death at least he knows what to expect. In another cynical and hilarious observation about life, Harry explodes into a tirade about the pain of divorce—where the party who gains

possession of something as meaningless as a wagon-wheel coffee table can become an emotional battle. Ryan plays straight man to Crystal's flow of one-liners in her portrayal of the ever optimistic Sally. Ryan's facial expressions betray Sally's understanding that she experiences the same emotional loss as Harry while her optimistic words become commonplace. Reiner succeeds at capturing the subtle details of these actions.

After eating a corned beef sandwich, like those made at Katz's Deli, one might experience a little gas. Watching *When Harry Met Sally...* is not without a similar discomfort. When the two finally sleep together we feel obligated to agree, as set up by Harry's theory in the beginning of the film, that they can't be just friends—once they sleep together the objective of the film is over and there is nothing more to look forward to. This leads to a feeling that Ephron violated the screenwriter's technique of saving the kiss for the last scene. However, just as one can treat the gas caused by a delicious corned beef sandwich as a minor inconvenience to easily—and perhaps joyfully—expel, the delightful post-sex storyline challenges the love between Harry and Sally. Through these challenges the film transcends the simple romantic comedy by exploring love. Harry defines his own expectations and feelings for Sally based on the experiences that they have shared.

While perusing the menu at Katz's Delicatessen in New York City, you might notice the Yiddish term "Mekheye." This translates into English as "An extreme pleasure, orgasmic, out of this world wonderful!" I beseech you, the next time you are hungry for a film to watch pick out *When Harry Met Sally....* Then, prepare yourself a corned beef sandwich and enjoy a romantic comedy that is truly "Mekheye!"